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THE UNION LABEL.

"THE union label is organized labor's most powerful weapon today." This remark was made to the writer by a prominent manufacturer, employing some twelve hundred union men. The object of this article is to examine the actual workings of this label, and to determine, if possible, its real significance.

What is the actual demand for goods bearing the union label? What can be said of the label's effect on quality and price of goods? These are obviously the important questions to answer. I will answer these for one city, and let the reader draw what conclusions he will for other cities.

The city investigated was Milwaukee, one of the principal manufacturing centers of the Great Lakes. The following important facts must be borne in mind: Of a population of 300,000, some 90,000 are foreign born, the chief nationalities being represented, first, by the Germans (54,000); second, by the Poles (17,000); and the remainder distributed among over twenty other nationalities. There are sixty-eight labor unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, representing twelve thousand workingmen with their families. An official report states that by these men "all union labels are pushed." Hence we clearly see the *potential* demand for union-label goods.

A thorough investigation was made in all parts of the city, and of all sorts of stores, in order to determine precisely the truth about the union label as the merchants see it.

In all two hundred and five establishments were visited, of the following kinds:

Department stores	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5
Clothing stores	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	27
Hat stores	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Shoe stores	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	21
Cigar and tobacco stores	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	34
Bakery and confection shops				-	-	-	-	-	10
Saloons	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	36
Grocery stores	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	71

Results are given in order and carry with them their own conclusions.

I. DEPARTMENT STORES.

Tabulating general results we have the following :

No demand for union-label goods	-	-	-	-	3
Some demand	-	-	-	-	2

One of the above stores, a very large one carried a strictly non-union stock. All of these stores had a substantial patronage among union people. This was apparently due to price and quality of goods, irrespective of labels. The label was on the cheaper class of goods only, and yet on these goods it made the prices a little higher. The proprietor of the large store with the non-union stock expressed his opinion in these words :

I have no demand whatever for label goods. A department store must stand for bargains. We cannot afford to pay union prices for goods. We have a big union trade on our non-union stock, because we buy cheap and sell cheap.

II. CLOTHING STORES.

Of the twenty-seven stores visited, one handled only non-union goods; one only union-label goods as far as these were obtainable. The non-union establishment was perhaps the largest men's clothing store in the city. The union store, on the other hand, was a small shop, located in the factory district, but among the best stores of that section. Its proprietor was a man of strong and forceful personality. He employed one clerk and one tailor.

"I have," he said, "been in business here three years. About half my trade is union, half non-union. My stock is all union-made where possible, but I cannot get union-label underwear, hosiery and neckwear. Across the street there is a union man now, going into a cheap, shoddy store, where he can buy a few cents cheaper. So it is with union men. They rant and bellow, and then sneak around to some scab shop to find sweat-shop clothes made by little children. They want to receive union wages, but don't want to pay union prices. I am building up my business and will enlarge my store soon. I depend upon handling a good line of clothing and keeping my good customers.

I get only well-made clothing. It costs a little more than cheap stuff, of course, but I consider it as cheap as scab-made of the same grade. I show my customers that I handle only reliable goods, free from sweat-shop diseases, and that they are cheapest in the long run. I believe in unions, and have helped them through several strikes. But they don't stand by me. I don't expect anything from them, for I have learned better. They will not support me."

This shows the position of the union merchant. He has carried on a successful business, thanks to his own business ability, but certainly not to the fact that he has maintained the only union store in the city.

Conditions in the remaining twenty-five stores were as follows:

Strong demand for union-label goods	-	-	-	-	3
Small demand	-	-	-	-	16
No demand	-	-	-	-	6

The largest stores reported "no demand." The label went with cheaper grades of goods; in fact, some merchants declared it a badge of cheap goods. This suggests an important truth, patent to any investigator, namely, that the label *should* be a trademark of good workmanship, but is not. It enhances the price, necessarily, for it stands for union wages and union hours. The merchant must pay more for the goods, however he sells them.

The label clothing in greatest demand was workingmen's overalls. In some cases purchase of these was compulsory, by reason of the one-dollar fine imposed by the union for wearing so-called "scab" overalls.

A few typical interviews will shed considerable light on the whole subject.

One merchant in the working district said: "I began with a small store in a factory suburb. Union men came in and asked for union-label goods. Their unions were strong, and so I ordered a big stock of union-label overalls and jumpers, which I sold on a narrow margin at fifty cents each, one dollar a suit. I sold them well till a store opened near by and put in a line of non-union overalls and jumpers at seventy-five cents a suit. That

soon killed my trade, and I had to close out my union line at a loss. That cured me."

Another merchant, located in the central part of the city, gave this testimony: "I hear little demand for union-label goods. Again, sometimes we remove old labels and put them on new garments to satisfy a union purchaser. Union-label goods cost more than others of same quality, and of course union men like to buy what they can get the cheapest. Women buy a great deal of clothing for the family, and they never ask for the label."

Another merchant was more pronounced in his views of the label. He said: "The union label is a fake. It does not stand for sanitary conditions, as claimed. It goes on poor and cheap goods and makes them cost more. I pay seventy-five cents a dozen more for union-label overalls than for non-union, but sell them at the same price, forty cents each. They are poorly made, are scant by actual comparison, and should cost seventy-five cents a dozen less than non-union goods. Two customers came into my store recently, one for an overcoat, one for a suit of clothes. Both wanted union-label goods. I argued the point with them and convinced them that they were making a mistake. Both bought non-union goods. Some time ago a customer wanted a certain kind of hat. I showed him a one-dollar non-union hat. He asked for the union label. I gave him a union-label hat, price one dollar and a half. 'Why is this?' he asked. I said: 'You support the union; it's good pay, short hours, etc., and you must pay more for your hat, of course.' 'Give me a non-union hat,' he said."

These interviews are given because they are strictly representative of the attitude of all the clothing merchants seen. Merchants, as a rule, are hostile to the label in the clothing industry. This is easy to understand. They want no questions raised as to the source of their supply. They do not want to be limited to a few manufacturers, but are anxious to be perfectly free to play one manufacturer against another. Cut-throat competition of other merchants makes a small margin of advantage a vitally important thing. Again, when their expectations of

union support are not realized they view the label with considerable disfavor, and look upon it as a mere outside interference with their business. A persistent demand for union-label garments would soon change the attitude of the merchants from one of hostility to one of friendship.

III. SHOE STORES.

Twenty-one shoe stores were visited. Four of these represented large eastern manufacturers, two being strictly non-union, and two being strictly union. All were apparently in a thriving condition, and were thoroughly first-class establishments.

Seventeen stores, however, carried both kinds of shoes, union and non-union. Their demand was found to be, in general, as expressed in this table:

Strong demand for union-stamp shoes	-	-	2	stores
Small demand	-	-	-	12 "
No demand	-	-	-	3 "

In shoes the range of choice in union-made is very wide, running from the cheapest working shoe to the high-priced shoe. The claim was not once heard that the union stamp made the shoe cost more. Customers as a rule, however, here as elsewhere, according to the investigation, are governed by considerations of price and quality, and not by the label. One German merchant who had handled a large union stock gave briefly as his conclusion of the whole matter: "Sie laufen hin und her und kaufen wo sie am billigsten kriegen."

The only complaint heard from shoe merchants was that they were forced, in some instances, to carry a double stock, union and non-union, to meet the occasional demand of a person who would insist on having a union-stamp shoe, and who would walk out of the store if he couldn't get it. At this stage of developments the merchant is unwilling to displace his non-union stock with a union stock. This means in a few cases a practical reduplication of stock so that all demands may be met.

IV. HAT STORES.

But one hat store was visited. Both union and non-union hats were sold, and the label was considered a good thing by the

merchant. He claimed that the label was often demanded, partly from choice, and partly to avoid the payment of a fine.

V. CIGARS AND TOBACCO.

The cigar industry is well organized in Milwaukee. One would naturally look for a very strong support of the union label on cigars and tobacco, since these are articles used so extensively by union men. But the results of the investigation here are most surprising. They may be briefly tabulated for the thirty-four shops visited as follows:

Selling union-label goods only	-	-	-	2	shops
Strong demand for union label	-	-	-	0	"
Small demand	-	-	-	12	"
No demand	-	-	-	20	"

Of the two union shops above, one was a small manufacturing concern, selling its own product. The other was a small retail shop, and has now failed and gone out of business.

The remaining thirty-two shops sold both union and non-union tobacco, but twenty of these felt no appreciable demand for the union-label product as such. The union-label goods were sold as extensively as the non-union, but no questions were raised concerning the label.

The larger establishments, catering to the demand for higher-priced goods, heard no call whatever for the union-made article. The label was almost wholly confined to the cheaper grade of cigars. In only one instance was it found on a ten-cent cigar. In other cases ten-cent cigars were sold without the label, while five-cent cigars from the same shop bore the label. Three prominent and well-known brands of tobacco, "made by a trust," and under the American Federation of Labor boycott, were greatly in demand in all classes of shops and in all parts of the city.

A merchant in one of the largest establishments summed up the situation in this way: "I handle both the union and the non-union goods, but hear no demand for the union-label. Union men like to use trust-made goods. They smoke Duke's Mixture, chew Battle Axe plug, and smoke Henry George cigars—all trust-made (and under the boycott of the American Federation

of Labor). If they must pay more for a union-label piece of goods than for a non-union of the same grade, they forget their co-operation and remember their pocketbooks. My trade depends upon the quality of my goods altogether. Rarely do I hear a man ask for the label."

Here, as elsewhere, it seems that the individual lacks the social sense. "Fraternity" and "co-operation" are words that have a charming sound, but he doesn't care to invest any money in them.

VI. BAKERIES AND CONFECTIONERY SHOPS.

The investigation of bakeries brings out the position of women toward the use of the union label on bread. Ten shops were visited, and conditions found as follows:

Strong demand for union label	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	shops
Small demand	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	"
No demand	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	"

Six of these shops were strictly non-union, and sold only their own bread. Four were general confectionery shops, and sold bread, pies, and pastries of several different bakers.

The evidence seems to prove that women are generally apathetic toward the efforts of organized labor to push the union label, at least, the label on bread. Some object to the label being stuck on bread after the manner of a postage stamp on a letter.

Bakers, in their turn, had no objection to the label in itself, provided it was placed on the wrapper of bread, and not on the loaf itself.

A leading baker said, when interviewed: "My bakery is a non-union shop, and has been during my eighteen years of business. One of my foremen is a union man, and I told him to organize the shop and I would join the union. But the men are all satisfied, get good wages, and so have never organized. About twenty-five per cent. of the bakeries of the city, I should judge, are union shops. Milwaukee people do not want a label stuck on bread; it doesn't look clean. I tried a private label, but had to give it up."

VII. SALOONS.

It is necessary to state at the outset that all beer made in Milwaukee is union beer. The saloons handle practically nothing but the famous Milwaukee product, and hence are, in that sense, union shops. Therefore the only investigation made in connection with saloons was to determine what kinds of cigars they sold, whether union only, or both kinds. Union saloons, it is hardly necessary to add, are supposed to boycott non-union tobacco.

Here are the conditions:

Selling only union-label tobacco	-	-	-	21 saloons
Selling both kinds	-	-	-	15 "

Union men, when in groups, bought only union-label tobacco, but singly they were not particular. Almost without a dissenting voice saloon-keepers pronounced in favor of the union label, and showed a disposition to ally themselves on the side of trades unions. Their sincerity was, in general, not to be questioned. A few, no doubt, took this stand merely to please the majority of their customers.

VIII. GROCERY STORES.

A large number of grocery stores were visited, because here so large a part of the laborer's wages is spent. The four commonest commodities kept at grocery stores, which bear the union label, are flour, brooms, tobacco, and bread. Concerning these articles, then, conditions were found in the seventy-one stores as follows:

No demand for union labels of any kind	-	-	52 stores
Demand for union-label flour	-	-	2 "
Demand for union-label brooms	-	-	2 "
Demand for union-label tobacco	-	-	15 "
Demand for union-label bread	-	-	0 "

Of course it is the women of the family who do the principal part of the purchasing at grocery stores. This but emphasizes the fact already alluded to, namely, that they do not, as a general rule, feel any interest in the union label. There are, however, noteworthy exceptions. Two stores referred to above

recognized a demand for union-label brooms. In each case, one woman customer had demanded that kind of a broom, and in response to this demand the merchant had in each case placed in stock a line of union-label brooms. This is a hint, at least, of the potentiality of the label.

A representative interview will illustrate the unfavorable side of the matter, as seen from the merchant's standpoint.

"We sell both kinds of flour," said a merchant in the manufacturing district, "but people don't care anything about the label. It is all in the goods. A walking delegate of a certain union opened up a general grocery store farther up in the city, and sold only union-label bakery goods. He soon heard a strong demand for five-cent pies, but could not furnish them union-made. He got them from a non-union shop, and at this his union baker withdrew, for his rule was, all union goods or none. Then the grocer got all his bakery goods from non-union shops, thus meeting the demand and letting the label go. People buy where they think the best bargains are."

Some local elements in Milwaukee must be mentioned as *partial* explanation of this unfavorable showing, on the whole, which this investigation makes for the union label. The foreign-born element is strong, especially the German and Polish. Women's label leagues are not yet formed, as in many other cities. And, finally (and significantly, too), some labor leaders of this city are not in full sympathy with the label movement, and their attitude is reflected in their followers. A high official expressed himself in these terms: "The label is a mistake; it is contrary to human nature. It puts unnecessary burdens on the union man who is expected to purchase the label goods. The label is costly to print, to advertise like patent medicine on street cars and bulletin boards, to defend in court against counterfeits. A uniform label would have been better than the sixty or seventy labels now in use, but it is too late for that. There would be too much work to do all over again. We hope nothing from the label. We appreciate the fact, too, that there are many frauds connected with granting and using the label."

Some observations are timely in conclusion. Strict labor

laws in Wisconsin forbid both boycotting and blacklisting. Denied the boycott, the label loses at once a large part of its power, for it has more success in boycotting an "unfair" merchant than in building up a "fair" one.

Success of the label would affect four kinds of labor at which it is professedly aimed: convict labor, child labor, union labor, and non-union labor. Convict labor would be forced into industries competing little or not at all with organized labor. Child labor would be abolished in sweat-shop and factory. Union labor would be triumphant with its short hours, fair wages, and good sanitary conditions. The non-union man, now known as "traitor" and "scab," would certainly find himself in a precarious condition if he refused to ally himself with any labor organization.

Will the public accept the union label as a necessary part of the industrial situation, or will they reject it as an unwelcome and undesirable interference with the normal course of business?

JAMES E. BOYLE.

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